

Boris Lavrenyov

The Forty First

BORIS LAVRENYOV

Boris Lavrenyov's name is closely bound up with the early days of Soviet literature and the Soviet theatre. He put it this way—"my literary birth took place after the revolution". His play *The Break-Up* was first produced in 1927 and today is still in the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre and many other Soviet theatres. Lavrenyov (1891-1959) is a dramatic writer; this is especially true of his stories, long and short, which are filled with the heroic romanticism of the revolutionary epoch. *The Forty First* is one of his best-known tales.

In memory of Pavel Dmitrievich Zhukov

THE FORTY FIRST

CHAPTER 1

*Which was written only because
it had to be written*

For a brief moment the glittering encirclement of Cossack sabres was cut through on the north by a jet of machine-gun fire, and in a last wild effort the crimson Yevsukov plunged through the breach.

Those who escaped from the death-ring in the sands of the hollow were: the crimson Yevsukov, twenty-three of his men, and Maryutka.

A hundred and nineteen others and almost all the camels lay motionless on the frozen sands, among the snake-like roots of saksaul and the red twigs of tamarisk.

When Cossack officer Buryga was informed that the remnants of the enemy had escaped, he twisted his bushy moustache with a bear-like paw, stretched his mouth in a yawn like the opening of a cave, and drawled lazily:

"To hell with them! Don't bother chasing them; it'll only wear out the horses. The desert'll get them."

Meanwhile, the crimson Yevsukov, with Maryutka and the twenty-three, were plunging erratically, like wounded jackals, deeper and deeper into an illimitable waste of sand.

No doubt the reader is impatient to know why Yevsukov was crimson.

I shall explain.

When Kolchak corked up the Orenburg railway line with a mass of bristling bayonets and human

pulp, setting the dumbfounded locomotives on their rear ends to rust on out-of-the-way sidings, the Turkestan Republic was left without black dye for its leather.

And those were roaring, raging, leather days.

The human body, thrown out of the domestic comfort of four walls into rain and shine, heat and cold, had need of a strong protective covering.

And so it donned leather.

Ordinarily the jackets were dyed black with a steel-blue tinge, a colour as stern and hard as the men who wore them.

But Turkestan was left without this black dye.

And so Revolutionary Staff Headquarters had to issue an order requisitioning private stocks of the German aniline dyes with which Uzbek women from the Ferghana Valley gave the tints of the fire-bird to their gauzy silks, and thin-lipped Turkmenian women wove brilliance into the complicated patterns of their Tekke carpets.

The Red Army began dyeing skins with these aniline dyes, and in no time its ranks were scintillating with all the shades of the rainbow: emerald, sapphire, crimson, cobalt, purple, saffron.

Fate, in the person of a pock-marked supply man, meted out to Commissar Yevsukov a crimson jacket and breeches.

From early youth Yevsukov's face had had a crimson cast (sprinkled over with brown freckles) and the top of his head was covered with a light fuzz instead of hair. If to this we add that he was short in stature and voluminous in circumference and that his figure made a perfect oval, it can instantly be seen that in his crimson jacket and breeches he looked for all the world like an animated Easter egg. The straps of his trappings crossed on his back to form the letter X, and one would

expect that on turning round he ought to exhibit the letter B on his front to complete the saying.*

Nothing of the sort. Yevsukov did not believe in Christ or in Easter. He believed in the Soviets, the International, the Cheka, and the heavy revolver he clutched in strong, gnarled fingers.

The twenty-three who escaped with him out of the death-ring of sabres were the usual run of Red Army men. Just ordinary men.

With them, and one of them, was the girl Maryutka.

Maryutka was an orphan from a fishing village hidden among the reeds of the vast Volga delta near Astrakhan. For twelve years, beginning at the age of seven, she had sat astride a bench stained with fish entrails, ripping open the slippery grey bellies of herring.

When to all towns and villages came news of the enlistment of volunteers into what was then called the Red Guards, Maryutka stuck her knife into the bench, got up, and marched off in her stiff canvas trousers to sign up.

At first they drove her away, and then, seeing the obstinacy that brought her back day after day, they guffawed and accepted her in the ranks on the same terms as the men.

Maryutka was slender as a reed growing on the river bank, with auburn plaits that she wound round her head under her brown Turkmenian cap, and with a yellowish, cat-like glint in her almond-shaped eyes.

The main thing in Maryutka's life was her dreams. She was given to day-dreaming, and she was also given to writing "poetry", tracing totter-

* X and B are the first letters of the Russian words "Христос Воскресе" meaning "Christ is risen". Easter eggs were usually marked with these initials.—Tr.

ing letters with a stub of pencil on any scrap of paper that came to hand.

The entire detachment knew this. The minute they entered a town that had its own newspaper, Maryutka would ask for writing paper. On receiving it, she would lick her lips, which had suddenly gone dry with excitement, and painstakingly copy out her "poetry", giving each poem a title, and writing at the bottom: "By Maria Basova."

There were poems of revolution, of struggle, poems about the leaders. There was even one about Lenin.

And she would take them to the editorial office. The editors, astounded by the sight of this slip of a girl in a leather jacket and with a rifle over her shoulder, would take the verses and promise to read them. And Maryutka, after casting a serene look at each of them in turn, would go out.

The secretary of the editorial board would snatch them up eagerly and begin to read. Soon his shoulders would hump up and begin to shake, his mouth distort with irrepressible laughter. His colleagues would gather round, and between shrieks of laughter he would read the verses out loud while his listeners writhed on their windowsills (there was no furniture in the offices of those days).

The next morning Maryutka would come back, gaze with steady eyes at the secretary's twitching face, then pick up her poems and say in a singsong voice:

"No good, eh? No finish? I knew it. I chop them out of my heart like with an axe, but—they're no good. I s'pose I've got to work harder. Can't be helped. What the hell makes it so hard, d'ye think? A fish-pox on them!"

And out she would go with a shrug of her shoul-

ders, pulling her Turkmenian cap down over her eyes.

Maryutka was not much of a poet, but she was an expert sharp-shooter. She was the best shot in the detachment, and in battle she was always to be found at Yevsukov's side.

He would point a finger.

"Look, Maryutka! An officer!"

She would screw up her eyes, lick her lips, and leisurely level her gun. Bang!—and she had her man. Never a miss.

After each shot she would say as she lowered her gun:

"The thirty-ninth, a fish-pox on him! . . ." "The fortieth, a fish-pox on him!"

"Fish-pox" was her favourite oath. She hated any really obscene words, and whenever the men used them in her presence she would frown and blush, but she never said anything.

Maryutka had given a promise at headquarters and she kept it and no one in the detachment could boast of having one of her affections.

One night a Magyar named Gucsa, who had recently joined their detachment and had been casting longing glances at her for some days, stole up to where she was lying. It ended badly. The Magyar crawled away minus three teeth and plus a big lump on his forehead. Maryutka had treated him to the butt-end of her revolver.

The men enjoyed making harmless jokes at her expense, but in battle they took more care of her than of themselves. This was dictated by some unacknowledged tenderness hidden deep down within them, under the hard surface of their many-coloured leather jackets.

Such, then, were the crimson Yevsukov, Maryutka and the twenty-three, who escaped to the north, into the frozen sands of the endless desert.

It was the time of the year when February whines its stormy tunes. Fluffy snow carpeted the hollows between the mounds of sand, and the sky shrieked above the heads of those who were pushing their way into the storm and the gloom—shrieked with wind. Or perhaps with enemy bullets tearing through the air.

It was hard going. Their ill-shod feet sank deep into the sands and the snow. The hungry mangy camels snorted, howled and spat. The sands, blown into billows by the wind, had the glitter of salt crystals, and for hundreds of miles all around the earth was severed from the sky by a horizon line as clean and definite as if cut with a knife.

This chapter, to tell the truth, has a minor share in my tale. It would have been simpler to have plunged straight into the heart of it. But, among other things, the reader had to know where the remnants of the special Guryev Detachment, which found itself thirty-seven versts north-west of the Kara-Kuduk well, came from, and why there was a girl among them, and why Commissar Yevsukov was crimson.

In a word, it was written only because it *had* to be written.

CHAPTER 2

In which a dark spot appears on the horizon and turns out to be, on closer inspection, Lieutenant of the Guards Govorukha-Otrok

It is seventy versts from the well of Djan-Geldi to the well of Soi-Kuduk, and another sixty-two to the spring at Ushkan.

“Halt! Pitch camp!” said Yevsukov in a frozen voice, pointing to some saksaul roots with his rifle butt.

They made a camp-fire of saksaul twigs. Sooty resinous flames leapt up, and a dark circle of dampness appeared on the sand round the fire.

The men took rice and fat out of their packs. Soon the mixture was boiling in the iron pot, giving off a strong smell of mutton.

Silent, their teeth chattering, the men huddled round the fire, pressing close to one another to keep out the icy fingers of the wind. They warmed their feet by pushing them into the very fire, and the hardened leather of their boots began to crackle and hiss.

Through the white blur of snow came the dismal tinkle of the bells on the hobbled camels.

Yevsukov rolled a cigarette in trembling fingers.

"Got to decide, comrades, where we're to go from here," he forced out in a cloud of smoke.

"Where can we go?" came a lifeless voice from the other side of the fire. "It's all the same. Everything's clear. We can't go back to Guryev—the bloody Cossacks are there. And outside of Guryev there ain't no place to go to."

"What about Khiva?"

"Ho, Khiva! Six hundred versts across the Kara Kum in the dead of winter? What'll you use for food? Or are you going to make a stew of the lice in your pants?"

There was a burst of laughter.

"Everything's clear. We're through," the same lifeless voice summed up.

Yevsukov's heart contracted under his crimson armour, but he gave no sign of it.

"You slobbering louse!" he burst out furiously. "Plenty of time before we're through. Any fool can kick the bucket! But you've got to use a bit of gumption to stay alive."

"We could make for Fort Alexandrovsky. Our own sort lives there. Fishermen."

"No good," put in Yevsukov. "I got word Denikin made a landing there. The Whites are at Alexandrovsky and at Krasnovodsk too."

Somebody groaned in his sleep.

Yevsukov brought a strong hand down on his fire-hot knee.

"Stop yammering!" he barked. "There's only one place to go—to the Aral Sea. We'll go to the Aral and march round it to Kazalinsk. We've got headquarters at Kazalinsk. It'll be like going home to go there."

He barked it out and was silent. Even he did not believe they could make it.

The man lying next to him raised his head.

"And what'll we eat on the way?"

"Got to pull in our belts," snapped Yevsukov. "We ain't the Princes Royal. Maybe it's beefsteaks and honey you'd like? You'll do without. We've still got some rice left and a little flour."

"Won't last more than three days."

"Why not? What of it? It won't take us more than ten to get to Chernysh Bay. We've got six camels. Soon as we've eat up all our supplies we'll kill the camels. They'd be no good to us anyhow. We'll kill one, load the meat on the others and move on. We'll get there somehow."

Nobody said anything. Maryutka lay at the fire with her head in her hands, gazing into the flames with unwinking, cat-like eyes. Yevsukov suddenly felt uncomfortable. He got up and shook the snow off his jacket.

"So that's that," he said. "Orders is, up and off at daybreak." His voice rose jerkily like a startled bird. "Maybe we won't all make it, but we've got to try, because you see it's revolution, comrades. It's for the workers of the world."

The commissar looked each of his twenty-three men in the eye in turn. The light he was accustomed

to seeing in those eyes had gone out. Their gaze was dull and averted. Doubt and despair glinted between narrowed eyelids.

"First we'll eat the camels, then each other," murmured someone.

Silence.

Suddenly Yevsukov shrieked like a hysterical woman.

"Shut your mouth! Have you forgot your revolutionary duty? Silence! An order's an order. If you don't shut up you'll get stood up against the wall!"

He coughed and sat down. The man who was stirring the rice with a ramrod suddenly called gaily into the wind:

"Stop carping and eat your supper. What do you think I've been sweating here for?"

They spooned out big clumps of the greasy swollen rice, burning their throats in their hurry to gobble it down before it got cold. But even so a crust of wax-like fat froze on their lips.

The fire was dying down, throwing up showers of orange sparks against the black curtain of the night. The men huddled closer, drowsed off, snored, moaned and swore in their sleep.

It was almost morning when Yevsukov was shaken out of his sleep. Forcing his frozen lashes apart, he sat up and reached instinctively for his rifle.

"Take it easy."

Maryutka was bending over him. Her cat-like eyes glittered through the yellow-grey murk of the storm.

"What's up?"

"Get up, Comrade Commissár. While you was asleep I took a ride on a camel. There's a Kirghiz caravan coming from Djan-Geldi."

Yevsukov rolled over on his side.

"A caravan?" he repeated excitedly. "Sure you're not dreaming?"

"Sure as fish-pox. Forty camels."

Yevsukov was on his feet in a trice and whistling through his fingers.

The twenty-three found it hard to get up and stretch their stiffened bodies, but on hearing of the caravan they livened up.

Only twenty-two got up. The twenty-third stayed where he was, wrapped in a horse-cloth that shook with the convulsions of his body.

"He's got the blackfire," said Maryutka when she had thrust a finger inside his collar.

"Damn it all! What are we to do? Throw another blanket over him and let him lie. We'll come back for him. Where did you say the caravan was?"

Maryutka pointed to the west.

"Not far off. About six versts. Packs this size on the camels."

"Sounds fine. See you don't let them get away, men! Soon as we set eyes on them, close in on all sides. Don't spare your legs. Half to the left, half to the right. Get going!"

They wound their way in single file between the sand-hills, bent almost double, their spirits rising, their bodies warmed by the quick march.

From the crest of a hill they caught sight of the camels strung out like jet beads on a *takyr* as flat as a hand. The beasts were swaying under the weight of their packs.

"The Lord's sent them. He took pity on us," murmured a pock-marked youth named Gvozdyov.

"The Lord me foot!" burst out Yevsukov. "How many times have you got to be told there ain't no Lord; everything's got its own law of physics."

There was no time to argue. The order was given to advance in quick rushes, hiding in every hollow,

behind every gnarled bush. They clutched their rifles so tightly that their fingers ached. They knew they dared not let the caravan escape, that with the caravan would go their hope, their salvation, their lives.

The caravan advanced leisurely. The men could already make out the bright saddle-bags on the backs of the camels and some men in quilted robes and wolfskin caps walking beside them.

Suddenly Yevsukov, resplendent in his crimson jacket, rose out of the top of a hill and stood with pointed rifle.

"*Tokhta!*" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "If you've got any guns, throw them down! No tricks or it'll be the end of you!"

No sooner had he opened his mouth than the frightened camel-drivers started back and fell down in the sand.

The Red Army men, breathless from their swift march, rushed down on all sides.

"Take the camels, fellows!" shouted Yevsukov.

His voice was drowned out by a round of rifle fire coming from the caravan. The angry bullets yelped like puppies, and someone beside Yevsukov hit the sand with arms outstretched.

"Lie down, men! Give it to the bastards!" shouted Yevsukov, ducking behind a sand-hill.

There was another burst of rifle fire.

The shooting—too accurate for Kirghiz—was coming from behind the camels, which had been made to lie down. The bullets pelted the sand all about the Red Army men, filling the desert with their noise. But gradually the shooting died down.

The Red Army men stole up in little dashes. When they were about thirty paces away Yevsukov saw a head in a fur cap and a white Caucasian hood

protruding above one of the camels. Then he caught sight of the shoulder, and there was a gold shoulder-strap on it.

"Maryutka! Look! An officer!" he said, turning his head to Maryutka, who was crawling behind him.

"I see him."

Leisurely she took aim. The rifle cracked.

Perhaps her fingers were frozen, or perhaps she was trembling with excitement or from running. Whatever the cause, scarcely had she said, "The forty-first, a fish-pox on him!" when the man in the white hood and the blue coat rose up from behind the camel and waved his rifle over his head. From the bayonet fluttered a white handkerchief.

Maryutka hurled her gun down on the sand and burst out crying, smearing the tears over her dirty, wind-burnt face.

Yevsukov ran up to the officer. He was overtaken by a Red Army man who twisted his bayonet as he ran, the better to plunge it in.

"Hands off! Take him alive!" shouted the commissar hoarsely.

The man in the blue coat was seized and thrown down.

Five others who had been with him lay dead behind the camels.

The Red Army men, laughing and swearing, pulled the camels about by the rings in their noses and tied them together in groups.

The Kirghiz camel-drivers followed Yevsukov about and tugged at his sleeve in a hang-dog way. He shook them off, darted away from them, shouted at them, and pointed his revolver at their broad faces—though not without qualms of pity.

"*Tokhta!* Keep off! Orders is orders."

A greybeard in a rich robe caught him by the belt.

"Ui, *bai*," he murmured quickly, ingratiatingly. "*Bai* take camels—very bad. Kirghiz live by camels. No camels—Kirghiz die. No take camels, *bai*. *Bai* want money? Here, take money. Silver money—tsar money. Paper money—Kerensky money. How much you want, *bai*? No take camels."

"Why, you bloody idiot, can't you see it's finish for us without these camels? I'm not stealing them. I'm taking them for the revolution. Orders is orders! Just temporary. You fellows can walk back home from here, but it's death for us."

"Ui, *bai*. Very bad. No take camels. Take *abas*. Take money," pleaded the Kirghiz.

Yevsukov shrugged him off.

"I told you what's what. No more talk. Here, take this receipt and be off with you."

He handed the Kirghiz a receipt scribbled in indelible pencil on a scrap of newspaper.

The Kirghiz threw it away, fell to the ground and buried his face in his hands, moaning. His companions stood silent, and silent tears trembled in their slanting black eyes.

Yevsukov turned away and saw the captured officer; he was standing nonchalantly between two Red Army men, a cigarette in his mouth, his eyes following the commissar contemptuously.

"Who are you?" asked Yevsukov.

"Lieutenant of the Guards Govorukha-Otrok. And who might you be?" the officer asked in his turn, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

As he raised his head Yevsukov and his men were struck by the blazing blueness of his eyes, as if two balls of the finest French bluing were floating in snow-white suds.

CHAPTER 3

Concerning the inconvenience of travelling through the deserts of Central Asia without camels, with a reference to the sensation experienced by Columbus' sailors

Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrosk ought to have been Maryutka's forty-first. But for some reason—perhaps because her hands were cold, or perhaps because she was excited—she missed.

And so the lieutenant remained alive, an extra number on the list of the living.

Yevsukov gave orders that he be searched, and the search revealed a secret pocket sewed into the back of his smart suède jacket.

The lieutenant reared like a wild stallion when the fingers of the Red Army man felt out the pocket. But he was held firmly, and only the trembling of his lips and the pallor of his face betrayed his agitation.

Yevsukov carefully unwound the linen wrapping of the packet and his eyes fairly devoured the document it contained. He read it, shook his head, and did some hard thinking.

The document stated that the bearer, Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrosk, Vadim Nikolayevich, had been entrusted by the government of Admiral Kolchak, Supreme Ruler of Russia, to represent his person in the Trans-Caspian state headed by General Denikin. A letter attached to the document stated that the bearer was in possession of secret information that was to be conveyed orally to General Dra-tsenko.

Yevsukov refolded the packet and tucked it safely away in an inner pocket of his jacket.

"Just what is that secret information, Mister Officer? You'd better come out with it and not hold anything back, seeing as you're in the hands of Red

Army men and me being in command: Commissar Arsenty Yevsukov."

The lieutenant turned his ultramarine orbs on Yevsukov, smiled, and snapped his heels together.

"Monsieur Yevsukov? Cha-armed. Unfortunately, I have not been commissioned by my government to carry on diplomatic negotiations with anyone in so exalted a position."

Even Yevsukov's freckles went white. The man was laughing at him in front of the whole detachment.

The commissar snapped out his revolver.

"Look here, you White bastard! None of your lip! Either you spill your information or you swallow some lead."

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

"If you kill me I won't spill anything."

The commissar lowered his gun with a curse.

"You'll sing another tune before I'm through with you," he said.

The lieutenant went on smiling with one corner of his mouth.

Yevsukov spat and walked away.

"Are we to give him a round or two, Comrade Commissar?" asked one of the Red Army men.

The commissar scratched his peeling nose with a finger-nail.

"Won't do," said he. "He's a big cheese, he is. We've got to deliver him to Kazalinsk. They'll get his secret out of him there all right."

"You mean, drag him along with us? Lucky if we make it ourselves."

"So we're recruiting White officers now!"

Yevsukov snapped erect.

"Mind your own business," he shouted. "I'm taking him, and I answer for it. Shut up."

As he turned round, his eyes lighted on Maryutka.

"You're the one in charge of His Highness,

Maryutka. Keep your eyes peeled. I'll skin you alive if you let him get away."

Without comment Maryutka slung her rifle over her shoulder and went up to the prisoner.

"Come here, handsome," she said. "You're in my charge, but don't think because I'm a woman you can run away. I'll get you on the run at three hundred paces. I missed once—a fish-pox on you—but don't think it'll happen again."

The lieutenant glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then made an elaborate bow, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"I count it an honour to be taken captive by such a charming Amazon," he said.

"What's that you're jabbering?" asked Maryutka, throwing him a withering glance. "A *bourjui*. Most likely you can't do nothing but dance the mazurka. Well, shut your face and get going."

They spent that night on the shore of a little lake. An odour of iodine and decay came from the salt water under the ice.

Wrapping themselves up in the carpets and felt blankets they had pulled off the Kirghiz camels, they slept like the dead.

Maryutka tied the hands and feet of the Lieutenant of the Guards tightly with a camel cord for the night, winding the other end of the cord round her waist and clutching it in her hand.

The men guffawed.

"Hey, boys," cried bulging-eyed Semyanny, "Maryutka's wove a spell round her true love. She give him a love-potion of hemp."

Maryutka turned a scornful look on the hilarious men.

"A fish-pox on the lot of you! You can joke, but what if he runs away?"

"Simpleton! Where'll he run to in the desert?"

"Desert or no desert, this is safer." Then, turning to the prisoner: "Go to sleep, handsome."

Maryutka pushed the lieutenant under the carpet and went off to lie down herself.

It is heaven to sleep under a felt cover or a felt mat. The felt smells of the steppe in July, of wormwood, of vast wastes of sand. The body goes all soft and warm as it sinks into blissful sleep.

Yevsukov is snoring under his carpet, Maryutka lies with a dreamy smile on her face, Lieutenant of the Guards Govorukha-Otrok is sleeping stiffly on his back, his beautiful lips drawn into a fine line.

Only the sentinel is awake. He is sitting on the edge of a mat with his rifle on his knees—his rifle, dearer than wife, dearer than life.

He sits gazing out into the blur of snow where the camel bells are tinkling dully. They have forty-four camels now. Their way is clear. They'll get there now, however hard the going. No more doubts and fears.

The wind rushes past with a shriek, it rushes up the sentinel's sleeve. He hunches his shoulders and pulls a mat up over his back. The icy knives stop stabbing him and a warmth seeps into his numb body.

Snow, gloom, sand.

A strange, Asian country. . . .

"Where's the camels? The camels, God rot you! Asleep! Asleep! What have you gone and done, you bastard! I'll have your hide for this!"

The sentry's head swam from the kick of the foot. He gazed dazedly about him.

Snow and gloom.

Misty gloom, the gloom of the morning. And sand.

The camels are gone.

Where the camels had been, hobbled, they found the hoofprints of camels and the footprints of men, the footprints of sharp-toed Kirghiz *ichigs*.

Three of the Kirghiz must have followed the detachment all night and taken the camels as soon as the sentry fell asleep.

The Red Army men stood in silent groups. No camels. Where were they to look for them? They couldn't overtake them, couldn't find them in the desert.

"Shooting would be too good for a son of a bitch like you," Yevsukov said to the sentry.

The sentry was silent; tears froze into crystal drops on his eyelashes.

The lieutenant wriggled out from under his carpet. He glanced about and gave a little whistle.

"That's revolutionary discipline for you!" he said with a mocking laugh.

"Keep your mouth shut!" roared Yevsukov in fury, adding in a hoarse, unrecognisable whisper: "Well, what're you all standing here for? Get moving!"

Now only eleven men dragged themselves in single file, ragged and reeling, up and down the sand-hills. Ten lay in eternal rest along the cruel way. Almost every morning one of them would open eyes glazed with exhaustion for the last time, stretch out swollen, log-stiff legs and emit hoarse, gasping sounds.

The crimson Yevsukov would come up to the prostrate figure (the commissar's face no longer matched his jacket; it was grey and pinched, and the freckles looked like old copper coins), stare at it and shake his head. Then the icy barrel of his revolver would burn a hole in the sunken temple, leaving a round, black, almost bloodless wound.

They would sprinkle some sand over the body and continue on their way.

The men's jackets and trousers hung in shreds, their boots fell off, they wrapped their feet in strips

of carpet, they twisted rags round their frozen fingers.

Now ten pushed on, stumbling ahead, swaying in the wind.

One of them walked serenely erect: Lieutenant of the Guards Govorukha-Otrok.

Frequently the Red Army men would complain to Yevsukov. "How long are we going to drag him with us, Comrade Commissar?" they would say. "Why should we feed him? And then there's his clothes—good clothes. We could divide them up."

But Yevsukov forbade them to touch him.

"I'll hand him over if it's the last thing I do," he said. "There's lots of things he can tell us. We can't make mutton of a man like him. He'll get what's coming to him, have no fear."

The lieutenant's arms were bound at the elbow with a camel cord, the other end of which was tied to Maryutka's belt. Maryutka could hardly drag one foot after the other. The yellowish glitter of her cat-like eyes was particularly striking in her bloodless face. But the lieutenant was all right. He had just grown a little pale.

One day Yevsukov went up to him and stared into his bright blue eyes.

"Damn you!" he burst out hoarsely. "What the hell goes on inside you? Not much flesh on you, but the strength of two."

The lieutenant's lips curved in his usual mocking smile.

"You wouldn't understand. It's the cultural lag. With you the flesh conquers spirit, but my spirit is master of my body. I can order myself not to suffer."

"So that's it," the commissar said thoughtfully.

On every hand rose the sand-hills—soft, shifting, undulating. The sand on the crests hissed and wriggled like snakes in the wind. There seemed to be no end to it.

Now one, now another of the men would fall in the sand, gritting his teeth and groaning in despair: "I can't go on. Leave me here to die in peace."

Yevsukov would curse him, lash him, tell him he was "deserting the Revolution", and he would stagger to his feet and stumble on.

One of the men crawled to the top of a high hill. He stopped, turned his skull-like head and shrieked: "Boys! The Aral Sea!"

Then he fell on his face. With his last strength Yevsukov climbed to the top of the hill. A blinding blueness struck his inflamed eyes. He shut them and scraped at the sand with hooked fingers.

The commissar had never heard of Columbus, and he did not know that his Spanish sailors had scraped at the deck of their ship in the same way on hearing the cry "Land!"

CHAPTER 4

In which Maryutka holds her first conversation with the lieutenant, and the commissar fits out a naval expedition

On the second day they came to a Kirghiz settlement on the shores of the sea. The first sign they had of it was the acrid smell of a dung-fire that came over the sand-hills and made their empty bellies contract spasmodically. Then they caught sight of the low domes of *yurta* dwellings. Finally some shaggy little dogs came dashing up to meet them.

The natives clustered at the entrances to their *yurtas*, gazing in pity and astonishment at these sad remnants of human beings.

An old man with a caved in nose stroked the sparse hairs of his beard and rubbed his chest.

"*Salaam*," he said. "Where you go, *turá*?"

Yevsukov weakly pressed the rough palm that was offered him.

"We're Reds. Headed for Kazalinsk. Take us in, friend, and feed us. The local Soviet will reward you."

The Kirghiz shook his scanty beard and smacked his lips.

"Ui, *bai*. Red Army men. Bolshie. Come Moscow?"

"No, *turá*. Not from Moscow. From Guryev."

"Guryev? Ui, *bai*! Ui, *bai*! Come Kara-Kum?"

The slit-like eyes showed a glint of horror and respect for this faded crimson soldier who, braving the wild winds of February, had crossed the dread Kara-Kum Desert from Guryev to the Aral Sea.

The old man clapped his hands and gave orders in a guttural tongue to the women who came running.

He took the commissar by the hand.

"Come, *turá*, *kibitka*. Sleep little-little. Then eat."

The men dropped down like inanimate bundles and slept without stirring in the warm *yurtas* until nightfall. When they woke up the Kirghiz fed them pilau, and stroked their protruding shoulder-blades sympathetically.

"Eat, *turá*, eat," they said. "You weak. Eat, you strong."

They ate quickly, greedily. Their bellies grew bloated from the fat food and some of them were sick. They ran out into the sand, relieved themselves, then came back and set to again. At last they went back to sleep, warm and sated.

But Maryutka and the lieutenant did not sleep.

Maryutka sat by the smouldering embers in the brazier, all her past sufferings forgotten. She took a stub of pencil out of her pack and traced some letters on a leaf torn out of the supplement to an illustrated monthly one of the women had given her. This particular leaf carried a portrait of Count

Kokovtsev, Minister of Finance, and across the count's broad forehead and fair beard Maryutka inscribed her scrawling letters.

Around her waist the camel cord was still tied, and the other end was twisted round the hands crossed behind the lieutenant's back. Only for an hour had she released his hands, so that he could eat his fill of pilau. This done, she had secured them again.

The Red Army men tittered.

"Like a dog on a chain," they said.

"Gone soft on him, have you, Maryutka? Then tie him to you, tie him tight. If you don't, a fairy princess'll come on her magic carpet and whisk him away."

Maryutka did not deign to answer.

The lieutenant sat with his back against a post of the *yurta*, his ultramarine eyes focused on the jerky efforts of the pencil.

"What are you writing?" he said, leaning forward.

Maryutka glanced up at him through a dangling lock of auburn hair.

"None of your business."

"Perhaps you'd like to write a letter? Dictate it and I'll write it for you."

Maryutka gave a low laugh.

"Smart, ain't you? Just to get your hands loose to give me a clout and take to your heels. What d'ye take me for, handsome?... And I don't need your help. It's not a letter I'm writing, it's poetry."

The lieutenant's eyelashes flickered in surprise. He strained to get his back away from the post.

"Poetry? Do you write poetry?"

Maryutka flushed and interrupted the pencil's convulsions.

"Why the stare? You think you're the only one can dance the mazurka and I'm an idiot-girl?"

The lieutenant worked his elbows, but the bonds held.

"I don't think anything of the kind. I was just surprised. Do you think the time's suitable for the writing of poetry?"

Maryutka put down her pencil. She tossed back her head and the rusty bronze came spilling over her shoulders.

"Ain't you a funny one, just!" she said. "Does a person have to sleep in a feather-bed to write poetry? What if it's all boiling over inside me? What if I dream night and day of putting it all down—how we crossed that desert, cold and hungry? If only I could make it come tight in people's chests! It's blood I write with. But nobody wants to print it. They say I've got to study first. Study! How's a person to find time to study these days? It comes from my heart, from my simpleness."

The lieutenant gave a slow smile.

"You might read it to me," he said. "I'm interested. I understand something about poetry."

"You wouldn't understand this. Yours is rich man's blood. Sleazy. All you want to write about is flowers and love. I write about poor folk. About revolution," she ended up sadly.

"Why shouldn't I understand?" replied the lieutenant. "Perhaps I myself would never write about such things, but one person can always understand another."

Maryutka hesitantly turned Kokovtsev upside down.

"Oh, the hell! All right, then, listen, but don't dare laugh. I s'pose your papa had a gov'ness for you till you was twenty, but I went all the way myself."

"I wouldn't think of laughing, really."

"All right. I've put it all down—how we fought the Cossacks. and how we escaped into the desert."

Maryutka cleared her throat. Lowering her voice, she hammered out the words, rolling her eyes ferociously:

*So the Cossacks fell upon us,
Bloody hangmen of the tsar.
We gave them bullets plenty,
But that didn't get us very far.
Because there were so many of them
We were forced to retreat.
Our Yevsukov, like a hero,
Said the Cossacks must be beat.
We turned machine-guns on them,
We fought like hell that day,
But they wiped out our detachment—
Only twenty got away.*

"But I can't for the life of me finish it, a fish-pox on it! I don't know how to get in the camels," said Maryutka in a troubled voice.

The blue of the lieutenant's eyes was in shadow, but the whites gave off violet reflections of the gay little fire in the brazier.

"Good for you!" he said after a pause. "There's a lot of expression and feeling in the lines. Anyone can see they come from the heart." At this point his body jerked and he made a sound like a hiccup, which he covered up by saying hastily: "Please don't take offence, but it's very bad poetry. No skill, no polish."

Maryutka dropped the paper listlessly on her knee and gazed without speaking at the ceiling of the *yurta* for a while. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"I told you there was feeling in them. Everything inside of me sobs when I tell what happened. As for not being polished—that's what everybody tells me, just like you. 'No polish, so we can't print it.' But how am I to polish it? What's the secret? Look, you're a man with book-learning—can't you tell

me?" In her agitation, Maryutka addressed him almost with respect.

The lieutenant did not answer immediately.

"It's hard to say. You see, the writing of poetry is an art and every art must be studied. It has its own laws and rules. For instance, if an engineer doesn't know the rules for building a bridge, he either won't be able to build one at all, or he will build a bad one, one that cannot be used."

"But that's a bridge. He's got to know numbers and all sorts of clever things for that. But poetry's been inside me ever since I was born. Maybe it's a talent?"

"Perhaps. But even talent must be developed. An engineer is an engineer rather than a doctor because from birth he's had an inclination to build things. But if he doesn't study, nothing will come of his inclination."

"Won't it now? Think of that! Oh, well, a fishpox on it! Soon's we finish fighting I'll go to a school where they learn you how to write poetry. There are schools like that, aren't there?"

"There must be," said the lieutenant pensively.

"Well, that's where I'll go. I'm just about worn out by this poetry. There's nothing I want so bad as to get it put in a book, and there under every poem'd be my name Maria Basova."

The fire in the brazier died out. In the darkness the wind could be heard rustling the felt covering of the *yurta*.

"Say," said Maryutka suddenly, "them cords must be hurting your hands."

"Not much. Just a little numb."

"If you'll swear on your honour not to run away, I'll untie them for you."

"Where am I to run to? The jackals would get me. I'm not that much of a fool."

"Well, you swear anyway. Repeat it after me: 'I swear by the proletariat who's fighting for their rights and to the Red Army man Maria Basova not to try to run away.' "

The lieutenant repeated the oath.

The loop of the cord was loosened and the swollen wrists released. Blissfully the lieutenant moved his fingers.

"Now, go to sleep," yawned Maryutka. "If you run away now you're the worst louse that ever was. Here's the carpet, pull it up."

"Thanks. I'll cover myself with my coat. Good night, Maria."

"Maria Filatovna," corrected Maryutka with dignity as she pulled the cover over her head.

Yevsukov was anxious to let his whereabouts be known at headquarters. But he had to give his men a chance to sleep and eat and thaw out here in the *aul*. When a week was up he decided to follow the coast until he came to the town of Aralsk, from which he would go direct to Kazalinsk.

At the beginning of the second week some passing Kirghiz told him that an autumn storm had driven a fishing smack up on the shore of a cove about four versts away. They said the boat was undamaged and was lying unclaimed on the beach. The fishermen must have drowned.

The commissar went to inspect it.

The smack turned out to be of sturdy oak, almost new. The only damage the storm had done was to tear the sail and break the rudder.

After consulting his men, Yevsukov decided to send a group by boat to the mouth of the Syr Darya. The smack could easily accommodate four people and a normal load of supplies.

"That'll be better," said the commissar. "In the first place, we'll hand over our prisoner. After all,

who knows what might happen on the march? And we've got to get him there at all costs. And second, they'll know where we are and send out some cavalrymen to bring us clothes and things. If there's a good wind you can cross the Aral in three or four days and be in Kazalinsk on the fifth."

Yevsukov wrote a report and sewed it into a canvas packet along with the lieutenant's documents, which he had been carrying all this time in the inner pocket of his jacket.

The Kirghiz women mended the sail and the commissar himself made a new rudder of broken boards.

On a cold February morning when the low-hanging sun was a polished brass plate above a flat expanse of turquoise, a string of camels drew the smack out to the edge of the ring of ice.

They launched it in the open sea and the passengers went aboard.

Yevsukov said to Maryutka:

"You're in charge. You answer for everything. Keep your eyes on that officer. You'll be sorry you ever got born if you let him get away. See he gets there alive or dead. If you run foul of the Whites, don't give him up alive. Well, be off."

CHAPTER 5

Stolen from beginning to end from Daniel Defoe, except that Robinson has not long to wait for his Friday

The Aral is not a cheerful sea.

Flat shores overgrown by wormwood. Sands. Low hills.

Islands in the Aral Sea lie flat like pancakes on a frying-pen, and are hard to detect.

No birds. No foliage. No signs of human life, except in summer.

The biggest island in the Aral is called Barsa-Kelmes.

No one knows what this name really means, but the Kirghiz say it means "Island of Death".

In summer fishermen from the town of Aralsk go out to Barsa-Kelmes. The fishing is excellent. The sea fairly seethes with fish. But when the white caps appear in autumn, the fishermen take refuge in the quiet cove of Aralsk and stay there until spring.

If the storms set in before they have had time to transfer their whole catch to the mainland, the salt fish is left in wooden sheds on the island for the winter.

During severe winters, when the sea freezes over from the Bay of Chernyshov to the very Island of Barsa-Kelmes, the jackals have a fine time of it. They run over the ice to the island and feast themselves on salted barbel or carp until their bellies burst. In that case the fishermen do not find the remains of their catch in the spring, when the flooding of the Syr Darya, red with clay, crushes the ice.

From November to February storms rage up and down. The rest of the time there are only little rains, and in the summer the Aral is as smooth as a mirror.

A dull sea, the Aral.

It has only one beauty—the amazing blue of its waters.

A deep blue, a velvety blue, with the sparkle of sapphire.

Any geography book will tell you that.

On sending off Maryutka and the lieutenant, the commissar counted on quiet weather for a week or so. The old men of the settlement said the signs indicated quiet weather.

And so the smack with Maryutka, the lieutenant and two Red Army men in it (Semyanny and

Vyakhir, chosen because they had some knowledge of seafaring) set out for Kazalinsk.

A steady breeze filled the sail and rippled the water cheerily. The rudder creaked in a lulling way, and thick white foam curled away from the prow.

Maryutka untied the lieutenant's hands. There was nowhere a man could run away to from a boat—and Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrok took turns at the tiller with Semyanny and Vyakhir.

He steered himself into captivity.

When it was not his spell he lay on the bottom of the boat under a rug, smiling at his thoughts—secret thoughts, officer-thoughts, incomprehensible to anyone but himself.

This worried Maryutka.

"Why should he wear that grin all the time? As if he was going to a picnic. But it's clear what'll happen to him—a cross-examination and . . . goodbye. He's wrong in the head if you ask me."

But the lieutenant went on smiling, unaware of Maryutka's opinion.

At last her curiosity got the better of her.

"Where did you learn to handle a boat?" she said.

The lieutenant considered a moment.

"In St. Petersburg," he said. "I had a yacht. A big one. I went to sea in it."

"Yacht?"

"A sailing-vessel."

"I know that as well as you. I saw plenty of yachts in Astrakhan. The *bourjuis* had as many as you like. All white. Tall and graceful as swans. That wasn't what I meant. What was her name?"

"Nelly."

"Strange name."

"My sister's name. I named the yacht after her."

"Good Christians don't have names like that."

"Her name was Yelena. But we called her Nelly in the English manner."

Maryutka gazed silently at the pale sun pouring its cold white honey over everything. It was slipping down the sky to meet the blue of the water.

"This water! Blue as blue!" she said at last. "The Caspian's green. Did you ever see anything as blue as this?"

"According to Forel, it's number three," murmured the lieutenant, as if to himself.

"What's that?" said Maryutka, turning to him alertly.

"I was just talking to myself. About the water. I read in some book on hydrography that the water of this sea is a very bright blue. A scientist named Forel charted the colours of various bodies of water. The bluest is the Pacific Ocean. According to his chart, the Aral is number three."

Maryutka half closed her eyes as if to conjure up a picture of this chart showing different intensities of blue.

"It'd be hard to think of anything bluer than this. As blue as...." Suddenly her own yellow, cat-like eyes came to rest on the lieutenant's ultramarine ones. She started forward and a thrill went through her whole body, as if she had made some extraordinary discovery. Her lips parted in amazement. She murmured, "Your eyes are the same—the very, very same. I thought there was something familiar about this sea."

The lieutenant said nothing.

Orange blood splashed the horizon. The water in the distance was blue with inky shadows in it. An icy breeze came off the surface of the sea.

"From the east," said Semyanny, pulling the rags of his uniform round him.

"Looks like a storm," said Vyakhiri.

"Let it blow. In another two hours we'll be in sight of Barsa. If there's a wind we'll put in for the night."

Silence. The boat began to toss on the dark crests of the waves. Shreds of cloud were drawn across the grey-black sky.

“Sure enough—a storm.”

“We’ll be in sight of Barsa soon. Ought to be off there to port. Hell of a place, Barsa. Sand-banks everywhere. And wind. Pull in the sail, damn you! Pull it in! It ain’t the general’s suspenders!”

But the lieutenant was too late. The boat dipped over and a splash of foam struck the faces of its passengers.

“Why are you shouting at me? Maria Filatovna let the tiller slip.”

“I let the tiller slip? Mind what you’re saying, you fish-pox! I’ve had a tiller in my hand since I was five years old!”

The boat was pursued by towering black waves that snapped at its sides like dragons with dripping jaws.

“God Almighty! Where’s that bloody Barsa? It’s as black as hell.”

Vyakhir looked to the left.

“Hooray! There she is!” he shouted joyfully.

A pale streak gleamed whitely through the foam and the gloom.

“Hard a-port!” shouted Semyanny. “God willing, we may reach it.”

The prow made a cracking sound, the beams groaned. A wave broke over the sides, leaving the passengers ankle-deep in water.

“Bail her out!” screamed Maryutka, jumping to her feet.

“Bail? Nothing to bail with.”

“Your caps!”

Semyanny and Vyakhir tore off their caps and began feverishly bailing out the water. The lieutenant hesitated a moment, then pulled off his Finnish fur cap and joined in.

The gleaming white strip came rushing towards the boat and became visible as a flat beach covered with snow. It was made whiter than ever by seething foam.

The wind raged, hissed, howled, driving the smashing waves higher and higher. In a wild burst it attacked the sail, thrusting it out like a bloated belly.

The worn canvas burst with a report like a cannon shot.

Semyanny and Vyakhir rushed to the mast.

"Hold her!" shouted Maryutka, who was lying on the tiller.

A roaring wave rushed on them from behind and laid the boat on its side, pouring over it in a cold, glassy stream.

When the boat righted it was flooded almost to the gunwale and neither Semyanny nor Vyakhir were to be seen. The rags of the torn sail streamed wet in the wind.

The lieutenant was sitting up to his waist in water crossing himself with quick little movements.

"God damn you! Bail out the water!" cried Maryutka.

He jumped up like a wet puppy and started bailing.

"Semya-a-anny! Vya-a-akhir!" called Maryutka into the night, into the wind, into the clamour.

There was no response.

"Drowned, the poor bastards!"

The wind drove the flooded boat towards shore. The waters churned. The keel struck bottom.

"Out!" shouted Maryutka, leaping into the water. The lieutenant followed her.

"Haul her in!"

Blinded by the splashing water, buffeted by the waves, they seized the boat. It ground heavily into the sand. Maryutka seized the rifles.

"Get out them sacks of food."

The lieutenant meekly obeyed. On reaching a dry spot Maryutka dropped the rifles in the sand. The lieutenant put down the sacks.

Once more Maryutka called into the darkness: "Semya-a-anny! . . . Vya-a-akhir! . . ."

No answer.

She sat down on the sacks and cried like a woman.

The lieutenant stood behind her, his teeth chattering. But he managed to shrug his shoulders and say to the wind: "Robinson Crusoe and his good man Friday."

CHAPTER 6

Recording the second conversation and explaining the harmful effects of sea bathing at a temperature of 2 degrees above freezing-point

The lieutenant touched Maryutka on the shoulder. He tried to say something, but his teeth were chattering too violently. He thrust his fist under his jaw to stop its shaking.

"Crying won't help," he managed to get out. "We must move about. We'll freeze if we sit here."

Maryutka lifted her head.

"Where shall we move to?" she said hopelessly. "This is an island. Nothing but water all around."

"Even so we've got to move. We'll find a shed somewhere."

"How do you know? Was you ever here?"

"No, but when I was a schoolboy I read that the fishermen build sheds on this island to keep their catch in. We've got to find one of those sheds."

"And if we find one, what then?"

"We'll see in the morning. Get up, Friday!"

Maryutka gave him a frightened look.

"God, the man's daft. What'll I do with him? It ain't Friday, handsome, it's Wednesday."

"That's all right; don't mind what I say. We'll discuss that later. Get up."

Maryutka got up obediently. The lieutenant stooped down to pick up the rifles, but she pushed his hand away.

"No fooling! You gave me your word you wouldn't make a dash for it."

The lieutenant withdrew his hand and went off into peals of hoarse, wild laughter.

"You're the one that's daft it seems, not me. Use your imagination, silly. How could I make a dash for it here? I just wanted to help you with the rifles. They're heavy."

Maryutka was reassured.

"Thanks for the help," she said softly and seriously. "But I've been ordered to deliver you to headquarters, so I can't let you have a gun."

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and picked up the sacks. He walked ahead of her.

The sand, mixed with snow, crunched under their feet. There seemed to be no end to this low, sickeningly flat beach.

In the distance loomed something grey covered with snow.

Maryutka staggered under the weight of three rifles.

"Cheer up, Maria Filatovna! We're almost there. That must be a shed."

"If only it is! I'm done in. And frozen stiff."

They ducked into the shed. It was black as ink inside and filled with a nauseating smell of dampness and salt fish.

As the lieutenant groped his way he felt the stacks of fish.

"Fish! At least we won't starve to death."

"If only we had a light! If we could see, we might find a corner sheltered from the wind," groaned Maryutka.

"You can hardly expect to find electricity in a place like this."

"We could burn the fish. Look how oily they are."

The lieutenant laughed again.

"Burn the fish? You certainly *are* daft."

"Why?" said Maryutka testily. "Where I come from on the Volga we burnt as much as you like. Fish burn better than logs."

"It's the first time I ever heard that. But how will we set fire to them? I've got a flint, but what about chips. . . ."

"Oh, you softy. Anyone can see you was brought up hanging on your mamma's skirts. Here, take these cartridges apart and I'll get some chips off the wall."

The lieutenant's fingers were so frozen he could hardly take apart three cartridges. Maryutka almost fell over him in the darkness as she came back with her chips.

"Sprinkle the gunpowder here. In a little pile. Let's have the flint."

They twisted a rag into a fuse, and it smouldered like a little orange eye in the darkness. Maryutka thrust it into the gunpowder. With a hiss, it burst into slow yellow flames, licking up the dry chips.

"It's burning!" cried Maryutka joyfully. "Bring some fish. Bring carp—they're the fattest."

They laid the fish in neat piles on the burning chips. It sizzled, then burst into bright, hot flames.

"All we've got to do is feed it now. There's enough fish to last six months."

Maryutka glanced about her. The flames threw dancing shadows on the enormous stacks of fish. The wooden walls of the shed were full of cracks and holes.

Maryutka went to inspect the shed.

"Here's a corner without any holes in the walls!" she called out suddenly. "Pile on the fish, don't let

the fire go out! I'll clean out this place. We'll have a decent corner to live in."

The lieutenant sat down beside the fire, hunching his shoulders as the warmth crept into him. Swish! Flop! Maryutka was throwing the fish about in her corner.

"Everything's ready!" she called out at last. "Bring a light."

The lieutenant picked up a burning carp by the tail and went to look. Maryutka had made walls of fish on three sides, forming an open space about six feet square.

"Climb in and light another fire. I've laid some fish in the middle. Now I'll bring our supplies."

The lieutenant held the burning carp under the little pile of fish. Slowly, reluctantly, it caught fire. Maryutka came back, stood the rifles against the wall and threw down the sacks.

"Damn it all!" she exclaimed. "What did those two fellows have to go and get drowned for?"

"It would be a good idea to dry our clothes. We'll catch cold if we don't," the lieutenant said.

"Then why don't we? The fire's hot enough. We'll take them off and dry them."

The lieutenant squirmed.

"You dry your first, Maria Filatovna. I'll go out and wait, then I'll dry mine."

Maryutka looked pityingly at his quivering face.

"You're a fool if there ever was one. A real *bourjui*. What are you scared of. Ain't you never seen a naked woman?"

"Oh, it's not that. I just thought you might not—"

"Bosh! We're all made of the same flesh and blood. Take your clothes off, idiot!" she almost shouted. "Your teeth's chattering like a machine-gun. A fine time I'm going to have with you, I can see that!"

Steam rose from the wet clothes hung over the rifles. The lieutenant and Maryutka sat opposite each other by the fire, blissfully warming themselves in the heat of the flames.

"How white you are, fish-pox! You look as if you'd been washed in cream!"

The lieutenant flushed crimson and turned his head. He was about to say something but, noticing the yellow glow on Maryutka's breast, lowered his greenish-blue eyes. Maryutka threw a leather jacket over her shoulders.

"Time to snooze. Maybe the storm will be over in the morning. We're lucky the boat didn't go to the bottom. If the sea's calm we may be able to get as far as the Syr Darya. We'll find fishermen there. Lie down, I'll watch the fire. Soon's I feel myself falling asleep I'll wake you up. We'll watch in turns."

The lieutenant put his clothes under him and covered himself with his coat. He tossed and groaned in his sleep. Maryutka watched him without moving. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"A nice how-d'ye-do!" she said. "Sickly, he turns out. What if he's caught cold? I guess they kept him wrapped in velvet at home. Eh, what a life! A fish-pox on it!"

In the morning, when the light glimmered through the chinks in the roof, Maryutka woke up the lieutenant.

"You watch the fire, hear? I'm going to run down to the beach. Maybe our fellows managed to swim to shore."

The lieutenant got up with difficulty.

"I've got a headache," he said dully, holding his head.

"That's natural—from the smoke and the tiredness. It'll pass. Take some hard-tack out of the sack and fry yourself some fish."

She picked up her rifle, wiped it on her leather jacket, and went out.

The lieutenant crawled to the fire and took some sea-soaked hard-tack out of the sack. He bit into it, chewed listlessly, dropped it, and collapsed on the floor beside the fire.

Maryutka shook the lieutenant by the shoulder.

"Get up! Get up, damn you! We're done for!"

The lieutenant's eyes opened wide and his lips parted.

"Get up, I tell you! We're in for it now! The boat's washed away! We're done for now!"

The lieutenant stared at her in silence.

Maryutka stared back, then gave a little gasp.

The lieutenant's ultramarine eyes were filmy and vacant. The cheek that dropped heavily against her hand was on fire.

"So you did catch cold, you gutless scarecrow! What am I going to do with you?"

The lieutenant's lips moved.

Maryutka bent down.

"Mikhail Ivanovich, don't give me a bad mark. . . . I couldn't learn it. . . . I'll have it ready tomorrow. . . ."

"What're you raving about?" said Maryutka with a little start.

"Look, Rover! . . . Grouse!" he suddenly shouted, raising himself up.

Maryutka shrank back and covered her face with her hands.

The lieutenant fell back again, digging his fingers into the sand, muttering incoherently.

Maryutka darted a despairing look at him. The next moment she had taken off her jacket and thrown it on the ground; with difficulty she dragged the limp body of the lieutenant on to it, covering him with his coat. Then she sank down in a

sad little heap beside him, slow tears stealing down her thin cheeks.

The lieutenant tossed as he lay, throwing off the coat, but Maryutka stubbornly replaced it and tucked it tightly up to his very chin. Whenever his head slipped down on to the floor she propped it up again. Rolling up her eyes, she addressed what must have been heaven:

"Maybe he'll die. What'll I tell Yevsukov then? Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!"

She leaned over his burning body and looked into his filmy blue eyes.

A stab of pity pierced her heart. Reaching out, she gently stroked the curly hair that was matted from tossing. She took his head in her hands and murmured tenderly, "You blue-eyed silly, you!"

CHAPTER 7

Which is baffling at the beginning, but becomes clear in the end

Silver trumpets with bells on them.

The trumpets sound, the bells tinkle softly, like ice:

"Ting-a-ling-a-ling!"

"Ding-a-ling-a-ling!"

"Toot-toot, toot-toot!" blare the trumpets.

A march. No question about it—a march. The march that is always played during dress parades.

And the same square, spattered with sun falling through the green silk of the maples.

The band-master is leading the band. He is standing with his back to the band, and through the slit in his greatcoat his tail sticks out—a big red fox tail—and at the end of his tail there is a gold ball, and in the gold ball there is a tuning-fork.

The tail waves from side to side, the fork gives the instruments their key and shows the cornets and trombones when to join in, and whenever a musician yawns he gets a rap on the forehead with it.

The musicians are doing their best. Very amusing musicians. Just ordinary soldiers, guardsmen from various regiments. An all-army band.

But the musicians have no mouth. Perfectly smooth under their noses. The trumpets are thrust into their left nostrils.

They breathe with their right nostrils, blow with their left, and that gives the trumpets a very special tone—very gay and ringing.

“Ten-shun! Begin the music!”

“Shoulder arms!”

“Re-gi-ment!”

“Bat-ta-lion!”

“Com-pa-ny!”

“Battalion One—forward, march!”

Trumpets: “Toot-toot!” Bells: “Ting-a-ling-a-ling!”

Captain Shvetsov prances ahead on his glossy bay. The captain's behind is as tight and smooth as a ham. Tap-tap-tap!

“Good for you, fellows!”

“Tweedle-dum, tweedle-dee.”

“Lieutenant!”

“Lieutenant! The General is asking for the Lieutenant!”

“Which lieutenant?”

“From Company Three. The General is asking for Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrok!”

The General is on horseback in the middle of the square. His face is red, his whiskers are white.

“What does this nonsense mean, Lieutenant?”

“Ha-ha! Ho-ho! Hee-hee!”

“Are you mad? How dare you laugh? I'll.... I'll.... Do you realise who you're speaking to?”

"Ha-ha! Hee-hee! You're no General. You're a cat, sir!"

The General is on horseback in the middle of the square. Down to his waist he's a general, the rest of him is a cat. Not even a pedigreed cat. Just an ordinary tomcat—mangy grey-and-black. The sort that can be found in any backyard.

He clutches the stirrups with his paws.

"I shall have you court-martialled, Lieutenant! Unheard of! A guardsman, an officer, with his intestines showing!"

The lieutenant looked down and nearly fainted. True enough, out from under his scarf his intestines were protruding, very thin and of a greenish hue, and they were fastened to his belly-button, which was whirling round with dizzying speed. He seized his intestines but they wriggled out of his grasp.

"Arrest him for breaking his oath!"

The General drew one paw out of the stirrup, opened the claws, and reached for the lieutenant. On the paw was a silver spur set with an eye.

Just an ordinary eye. Round and yellow, and it looked into the very heart of the lieutenant.

It winked at him tenderly and began to speak. How an eye could speak nobody knows, but it spoke just the same.

"Don't be afraid," it said. "Don't be afraid. You're pulled through."

A hand raised the lieutenant's head and he opened his eyes to see a thin little face with a lock of auburn hair falling over the eyes—tender yellow eyes just like in the spur.

"What a fright you've given me, poor man! For a whole week I've been nursing you. I thought you was a goner. And us all alone on this island. No medicine, nobody to help. I pulled you through on

nothing but boiled water. First you threw it all up. Foul water. Salty. Stomach wouldn't take it."

With difficulty the lieutenant grasped the meaning of these gentle, anxious words.

He raised his head slightly and gazed round with uncomprehending eyes.

Piles of fish everywhere. A fire burning. A kettle hanging from a tripod. Water boiling.

"What is it? Where am I?"

"Have you forgot? Don't you know me? Maryutka."

The lieutenant rubbed his forehead with a transparent hand. Remembering, he gave a faint smile.

"Ah, yes. Robinson and Friday."

"Oh, dear! Off again. You've got that Friday on the brain. I don't know what day it really is. I've lost count."

The lieutenant smiled again.

"I don't mean the day. It's a name. There's a story about how a man found himself on a desert island after a shipwreck. He had a man named Friday. Haven't you ever read it?" He dropped back on the jacket and coughed.

"No. I've read lots of stories, but not that one. But you lie down. Lie still, don't move, else you'll get sick again. I'll boil some fish. You'll get strong once you start eating again. You ain't had a thing in your mouth but water this whole week. A body can see straight through you. Lie down."

The lieutenant closed his eyes weakly. His head was full of the ringing of bells. This reminded him of the trumpets with the bells on them and he gave a quiet laugh.

"What is it?" asked Maryutka.

"Nothing in particular. I just remembered a funny dream I had when I was delirious."

"You kept crying out. Giving orders, swearing. What a time I had! The wind howling, nobody

anywhere about, me all alone with you on this island, and you off your chump. Wasn't I scared, just!" She gave a little shudder. "I didn't know what to do."

"How did you manage?"

"I don't know myself. Most of all I was scared you'd die of starvation. I had nothing but water to give you. I crumbled all the hard-tack that was left into the water you drank, and when it was gone there was nothing but fish. What's salt fish for a sick man? Wasn't I just glad when you began to come to!"

The lieutenant reached out and put his long fingers, beautiful in spite of the dirt, on Maryutka's arm.

"Thanks, Maryutka," he said, stroking her arm gently.

She blushed and pushed his hand away.

"Don't thank me. It's only natural. I'm not a beast to let a man die."

"But after all, I'm an officer . . . your enemy. Why should you have bothered to save me? You're half-dead yourself."

There was a moment's pause of puzzlement. But presently Maryutka dismissed her problem with a wave of her hand and a little laugh.

"Enemy—you? Why, you can't even lift a finger. A fine enemy! It's my fate, I guess. I didn't shoot you straight off—missed my aim for the first time in my life, and so it's my fate to worry along with you to the end. Here, eat this."

She held out a pot in which an amber chunk of sturgeon floated. The delicate flesh gave off a mild, tempting odour. The lieutenant took out the fish and ate it with relish.

"But it's terribly salty. It burns your throat."

"Can't be helped. If there was fresh water I could

soak the salt out of it, but there ain't. Salt fish and salt water a fish-pox on them both!"

The lieutenant pushed the pot away.

"What's the matter, had enough?"

"Yes, thanks. You eat some."

"Me? I've ate nothing else for a week—it won't go down any more."

The lieutenant lay back propped up on his elbow.

"If only I had a smoke!" He sighed.

"A smoke? Why didn't you say so sooner? I found some tobacco in Semyanny's sack. It got a little wet, but I dried it. I knew you'd want to smoke. A smoker gets the longing worst after he's been ill. Here, take it."

The lieutenant was touched. He took the pouch in trembling fingers.

"You're a jewel, Maryutka. Better than any nursemaid."

"I guess blokes like you can't live without a nursemaid," said Maryutka drily, then blushed.

"I haven't any paper to roll a cigarette with. That Crimson of yours took every bit of paper I had, and I've lost my pipe."

"Paper?" Maryutka considered.

With a decisive movement she turned back the jacket lying on the lieutenant's knees, thrust her hand into the pocket, and pulled out a little bundle of paper. Untying the string, she held out a few sheets.

"Here's some," she said.

He took the papers and glanced at them. Then he looked at Maryutka. His eyes were full of blue consternation.

"But this is your poetry! Are you mad? I won't take them."

"Go ahead, damn it all! Don't go tearing the heart out of me, you fish-pox!" shouted Maryutka.

The lieutenant looked at her.

"Thank you, Maryutka. I'll never forget this."

He tore off a tiny corner, rolled a cigarette, and lighted up. Then he lay gazing into space through the blue tendril of smoke curling up from his cigarette.

Maryutka gazed at him intently. Suddenly she said:

"There's one thing I can't make out. What makes your eyes so blue? I never seen eyes like that in my life. They're so blue you could drown in them."

"I don't know," said the lieutenant. "I was born with them. Lots of people have told me they were an unusual colour."

"And so they are. Soon as we took you prisoner I thought: what makes his eyes like that? They're dangerous, they are."

"For whom?"

"For women. They slip right inside of you before you know it. Stir a person up."

"Do they stir you up?"

Maryutka flared.

"Don't be so nosy—keep your questions to yourself. Lie down, I'm going for water."

She rose and picked up the pot nonchalantly, but as she went to the other side of the stacked fish she looked back gaily and said again, in the same tone:

"You blue-eyed silly, you!"

CHAPTER 8

For which no explanations are needed

March sun. Spring in the air.

March sun over the Aral Sea, over a sweep of blue velvet. It caresses, it bites with hot little teeth, it stirs up the blood.

For three days, now, the lieutenant has taken the air.

He sits outside the shed, warming himself in the sun, gazing about him with eyes that are alive and joyful, and blue as the deep blue sea.

Maryutka has been exploring the island.

From her last excursion she came back at sunset, elated.

"Tomorrow we're moving," she said.

"Where to?"

"Over there—about eight versts from here."

"What's there?"

"A fisherman's shanty. Like a palace! Dry, sound, even the glass in the windows is whole. It's got a stove and some broken dishes—they'll all come in handy. Best of all, it's got sleeping-bunks—no more sprawling on the floor. If only we'd gone there in the first place!"

"But we didn't know about it."

"That's just it. And I've discovered something else, too—a wonderful discovery."

"What?"

"Some food behind the stove. I guess that's where the fishermen kept their supplies, and they left the remains behind. Some rice and about half a pood of flour. Sort of mildewed, but it can be ate. Maybe they saw an autumn storm coming and rushed away without bothering to take it with them. We'll get on like a house on fire now!"

The next morning they set out for their new quarters. Maryutka walked ahead, loaded down like a camel. She wouldn't let the lieutenant carry anything.

"You mustn't. It'll put you down again. Not worth it. Never fear. I'll manage. I'm skinny, but I'm strong."

By noon they were there. They dug away the snow, tied the door to its broken hinge, stuffed the

stove with carp, lighted it, and warmed themselves at the fire with happy smiles on their faces.

"Swells, aren't we? This is the life!"

"You're a wonder, Maryutka. I'll be grateful to you my whole life. I'd have died if it hadn't been for you."

"Course you would, you mamma's boy."

She held her hands out and warmed them at the fire.

"Warm as warm. Well, what are we going to do now?"

"Wait. What else?"

"Wait for what?"

"Spring. It won't be long now. It's the middle of March. In another week or two the fishermen will be coming for their fish and they'll rescue us."

"I hope you're right. You and me can't last much longer on this fish and mildewed flour. Another two weeks and it's the fish-pox for us!"

"What's that expression you're always using—a fish-pox? Where did you get it?"

"In Astrakhan. All our fishermen say it. Instead of real swearing. I don't like dirty words, but when my dander's up I've got to say something. That's how I let off steam."

She stirred the fish in the stove with a ramrod.

"You once said you knew a story about a desert island, remember? About Friday. Tell it to me now instead of just sitting here. It's awful how I love to listen to stories! The village women used to come to my aunt's house and bring old Gugnikha to tell stories. She must have been a hundred years old, or even more. Remembered Napoleon. I'd crouch in a corner and listen, afraid to breathe for fear I'd miss a word."

"You want to hear about Robinson Crusoe? I've forgotten half of it, it's been so long since I read it."

"Try to remember. Tell me whatever comes back to you."

"I'll try."

The lieutenant half closed his eyes, searching his memory. Maryutka spread out her sheepskin jacket on the bunk and curled up in the corner nearest the stove.

"Come and sit over here. It's warmer here in the corner," she said.

The lieutenant sat down beside her. The fire gave off a cheering warmth.

"Well, why don't you begin? I can't wait—there's nothing I like better than a story."

The lieutenant put his chin in his hand and began:

"Once upon a time a rich man lived in a town of Liverpool. His name was Robinson Crusoe. . . ."

"Where's that town?"

"In England. As I was saying, there lived a rich man named—"

"Wait. You say he was rich? Why is it all the stories are about rich folk, about princes and princesses? Why don't they make up stories about poor folk?"

"I don't know," said the lieutenant. "I never thought about it."

"I s'pose it's because it's the rich people themselves who make up the stories. Like with me. I want to write poetry, but I don't have the learning. If I did, I'd write poetry about poor people. Oh, well, I'll learn some day and I'll write it."

"And so this Robinson Crusoe got the idea of setting off on a voyage that would take him round the world. He wanted to see how other people lived. One day he set out in a big sailing-vessel. . . ."

The stove crackled cheerily and the lieutenant's words poured out in a steady stream.

Little by little the story came back to him—every little detail.

Maryutka listened with bated breath, giving little gasps at the most exciting places.

When the lieutenant described the shipwreck, she shrugged her shoulders incredulously.

"And everybody but him got drowned?" she asked.

"Everybody."

"The captain must've been a blockhead, or else he got soaked to the gills on the eve of the wreck. A good captain'd never let his whole crew get drowned. We've had lots of wrecks on the Caspian, but never more than two or three men got drowned. The rest always got saved."

"But we lost Semyanny and Vyakhir, didn't we? Does that mean you were a bad captain? Or perhaps you were soaked to the gills?"

Maryutka gasped.

"Sharp, ain't you, fish-pox! Get on with the story!"

When he got to the place where man Friday put in an appearance, Maryutka interrupted him again:

"So that's why you called me Friday, is it? Like as if you was Robinson Crusoe. And you say Friday was black? A Negro? I saw a Negro once—at the circus in Astrakhan."

When the lieutenant described the attack of the pirates, Maryutka's eyes flashed.

"Ten against one? Dirty, wasn't it?"

At last the story was over.

Maryutka sat silent for a while, nestling against his shoulder.

"It was lovely," she murmured at last. "I bet you know lots of stories, don't you? Tell me one every day."

"Did you really enjoy it so?"

"Lots and lots. Made the shiver run up and down my spine. You'll tell me stories every evening, won't you? It'll make the time pass quicker."

The lieutenant yawned.

“Sleepy?”

“No, I just haven’t got my strength back yet.”
“Poor little boy!”

Again Maryutka stretched out her hand and gently stroked his hair. He turned astonished blue eyes on her. In their depths a spark of tenderness was kindled that flew to Maryutka’s heart. Dazed, she strained towards him and pressed her dry parched lips against his bristling wasted cheek.

CHAPTER 9

In which it is proved that, although the heart defies all laws, one’s being, after all, determines one’s consciousness

Lieutenant of the Guards Govorukha-Otrok was to have been the forty-first on Maryutka’s death list.

He became first in her list of joys.

She developed a tender yearning for him, for his slender hands, for his soft voice, and above all, for his extraordinary blue eyes.

Her world was irradiated with this blueness. She became oblivious of the dismal Aral Sea and the nauseating taste of salt fish and mildewed flour. Gone was her longing to be part of the raging roaring life beyond the dark expanses of water. During the day she had her tasks: she baked cakes of the flour, boiled the odious sturgeon (which was causing little ulcers to appear on their gums), and sometimes she went down to the beach to see if the longed-for sail were not tipping towards them over the waves.

In the evening when the greedy sun rolled out of the vernal sky, she sat in her corner of the bunk, nestling happily against the lieutenant’s shoulder and listening.

The lieutenant told her many stories. He was a good story-teller.

The days rolled by slowly, heavily, like the waves.

One day, while basking in the sun near their shanty, the lieutenant narrowed his eyes and shrugged his shoulders as he watched Maryutka scaling a fat carp with her usual dexterity.

"Hm. What utter rot!" he said.

"What's that, darling?"

"Rot, I say. Life. Utter rot. Primary conceptions, cultivated views—a lot of claptrap. Conventional symbols, like those on a topographical map. Lieutenant of the Guards? To hell with all the Lieutenants of the Guards, I want to live. I've been alive for twenty-seven years, but I haven't lived yet. I squandered heaps of money, I travelled from one country to another in search of an ideal, and all the while I felt nothing but a great emptiness sucking at my vitals. If anyone had told me then that I would spend the most meaningful days of my life here, on this idiotic pancake of an island in the midst of this idiotic sea, I would never have believed him."

"What's that? What sort of days did you say?"

"The most meaningful. Do you understand? How can I put it so that you will understand? Days when I have not felt myself pitted against the whole world, an isolated unit struggling single-handed, but one merged completely with all this." He took in the universe with a sweep of his hand. "I feel myself inseverably a part of it all. Its breath is my breath. The breath of the tide, for instance—hear it? Swish, swish. It's not the sea breathing, it's me—my spirit and my flesh."

Maryutka put down her knife.

"That's putting it in the grand style. I don't get all the words. I'd just say—I'm happy here."

"The words are different but the meaning is the same. At present I should like never to leave the warmth of these absurd sands—to remain here for ever, to melt in the heat of this ragged sun and live the life of a contented beast."

Maryutka stared intently at the sand as if recalling something. Then she gave a tender, guilty little smile.

"The hell! I wouldn't stay here," she said. "It's too easy. Makes a person soft. There's not even anyone to show your happiness to. Nothing but dead fish. If only the fishermen would hurry and come! March must be almost over. I'm sick for the sight of live humans."

"Aren't we live humans?"

"We still are, but in a week's time, when even the dregs of that stinking flour is gone and the scurvy lets loose in us, what sort of a tune will you sing then? And besides, darling, you forget this is no time to loll on the stove-shelf. Our men are fighting out there, spilling their blood. Every hand is needed. How can I sit back and enjoy myself at a time like this? That's not what I took my army oath for."

The lieutenant's eyes flashed his surprise.

"Do you mean you intend going back to the army?"

"What else?"

The lieutenant played with a splinter he had broken off the door-post, and his voice flowed on in a deep rich stream.

"You foolish girl. This is what I wanted to say to you, Maryutka: I'm sick to death of all this bloodshed. How many years of hate and war have we had! I wasn't born a soldier. Once upon a time I lived the decent sort of life a human being ought to live. Before the war with Germany I was a student of philology, and I lived with books—beloved

books, that never betray you. I had lots of them. Three walls of my room were covered with them from floor to ceiling. I would sit in my room of an evening in a deep armchair, the fire burning brightly, the lamp glowing, while outside the St. Petersburg fog flicked a wet paw in the faces of the passers-by, and then, as now, I had a sense of being carefree and independent. And that gave rise to a certain blossoming of the spirit—one could almost hear the rustling of the blossoms—like the flowering of almond-trees in the spring, do you understand?"

"Hm," said Maryutka warily.

"And one fine day all that was exploded, smashed to smithereens. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I was sitting on the verandah of our country-house reading a book—I remember even that. There was a sinister sunset—deep red, giving everything a blood-like tinge. My father came up from town by train. He was holding a newspaper in his hand and seemed greatly agitated. He pronounced only one word, but there was deadly weight in it. War. A dreadful word, as bloody as the sunset. Then he said, 'Vadim, your father, your grandfather, and your great-grandfather responded to the first call of their country. I hope that you....' His hopes were not in vain. I left my books. I left convinced I was doing the right thing."

"Silly!" exclaimed Maryutka with a shrug of her shoulders. "If my old man bashes his head against the wall when he's drunk, do you think I ought to do the same? I don't see why."

The lieutenant heaved a sigh.

"No, you could hardly be expected to see. You never had to carry the burden of a celebrated lineage, family honour. One's duty—we were very sensitive about that."

"Well, what of it? I loved my father too, but if he was a blooming soak, there's no reason why I should be. You should have sent him packing."

The lieutenant gave a crooked, bitter smile.

"I didn't send him packing. I packed myself off—to the war. And there, with my own hands, I buried my human heart in that festering dung-heap, that universal grave-yard. Then came the Revolution. I was glad. I put all my hope in it, but it.... Look, not once in all the years I had been an officer in the tsarist army did I lay a finger on a soldier under me. But the Reds caught me in the railway station in Gomel, snatched off my shoulder-straps, and spat in my face. Why?... I managed to escape to the Urals. I still had faith in my country. Once more I set out to fight for her, and for the shoulder-straps that had been so dishonoured. The longer I fought, the clearer it became to me that I no longer had a country. And the shoulder-straps weren't worth fighting for. And I remembered the only thing that was humane and had lasting value. Thought. Ideas. I remembered my books. The only thing I want to do now is to return to them, to bury myself in them, to ask their forgiveness and settle down to live with them."

"So that's it, is it? The world's cracking in two, people are fighting for justice, spilling their blood, and you want to curl up on the sofa and read books?"

"I don't know... and don't want to know!" cried out the lieutenant in desperation, leaping to his feet. "The only thing I know is that the world's coming to an end. You were right when you said it was cracking in two. Oh, it's cracking, all right! It's rotten and falling to pieces! It's empty, stripped of its guts! It's dying of emptiness. It used to be young, fertile, unexplored, with the lure of new lands, undiscovered riches. That's all over. There's nothing

new to discover. Nowadays the mind's cunning is all expended on how to save what it has, to drag out existence for another century, another year, another week. Machines. Lifeless mathematics. And thought, made sterile by this mathematics, is concentrated on problems of how to exterminate human beings. The more human beings we exterminate, the fatter our own bellies and pockets will be. To hell with it all! I don't want to hear anybody's views but my own. Enough! I'm out of the running. I don't want to soil my hands any more!"

"Your pretty white hands! Your starched collars! You'll be big-hearted enough to let others dig in the dung for you, eh?"

"Let them, damn it all! Let anyone who has a taste for it. As soon as we're rescued, Maryutka, we'll go to the Caucasus. I've got a little place not far from Sukhumi. That's where we'll go. I'll settle down with my books and let the world go hang. What I want is peace and quiet. I don't want justice. I want peace. And you'll begin to study. You want to study, don't you? You've complained so many times that you had no chance to study. Well, here's your chance. I'll do everything for you. You saved my life and I'll never forget it."

Maryutka sprang to her feet.

"So that's what you want me to do, is it?" She hurled the words at him like nettles. "Lie beside you on a feather-bed while people are sweating out their life's blood for the sake of justice? Fill my belly with chocolates when every chocolate is bought with somebody else's blood? Is that what you want?"

"Come, now, must you be so coarse?" asked the lieutenant with a shudder.

"Coarse? You want everything nice and soft? Just you wait. You stuck your nose up at Bolshevik truth—'Don't want to know anything about it,' you said. Well, you don't know and never did know

anything about it—what it really is and how it's soaked through and through with sweat and tears."

"No, I don't know," said the lieutenant languidly. "But I find it very strange that a girl like you should let herself be so coarse."

Maryutka put her hands on her hips.

"I'm ashamed to have took up with the likes of you!" she burst out. "You worm, you spineless creature! 'Come away, deary, we'll loll on the bed, you and me, and have a nice quiet life!'" she mocked. "Other people are ploughing up the earth with their bare hands to make a new world, while you.... Ugh! you *are* a son of a bitch!"

The colour rushed to the lieutenant's face and his lips formed into a thin line.

"Don't you dare! You're forgetting yourself, you slut!"

Maryutka took one step forward, lifted her hand, and struck the lieutenant full force on his thin unshaved cheek.

He fell back, trembling and clenching his fists.

"Lucky for you you're a woman," he hissed. "I hate you, you cheeky little hussy!"

He stalked off to the shanty.

Maryutka gazed dazedly at her stinging palm, then waved it deprecatingly.

"Ain't he the gentleman! A fish-pox on him!"

CHAPTER 10

In which Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrok hears the roar of the doomed planet, and the author dodges the responsibility of ending the story

For three days Maryutka and the lieutenant did not speak to each other.

But it is hard for two people alone on a desert island to avoid each other.

And then, spring was in the air.

Spring arrived all of a sudden, in a rush of heat. The thin crust of ice covering the island had given way under the blows of spring's little golden hoofs some time before. Now the beach was a soft canary yellow against the thick blue glass of the sea.

At noon the sand was hot to the touch.

The sun rolled up into the sky like a wheel of gold, polished by warm breezes.

The two people on the island were weak from the sun, from the breezes, and from the scurvy that had begun to torture them.

This was no time to quarrel.

From morning to night they would lie in the sand of the beach, their inflamed eyes fixed on the blue glass, searching it for signs of a sail.

"I can't stand it any longer," Maryutka once moaned in desperation. "If the fishermen don't come in three days, I swear I'll put a bullet through my head."

The lieutenant gave a little whistle.

"I thought I was the spineless one. Patience, Maryutka, you'll be a big chief yet. That's all you're good for—to be a chief of a robber band."

"Why do you have to bring it up all over again? Can't you let bygones be bygones? It's true I got angry, but I had good cause to. It hurt to find you were so no-good. Hurt awful. You've wormed yourself into my heart to my own ruin, damn you, you blue-eyed devil!"

The lieutenant burst out laughing, falling on his back in the sand and kicking his feet in the air.

"What's wrong? Are you crazy?" asked Maryutka.

The lieutenant went on laughing.

"Hey, fat-head, can't you answer?"

But the lieutenant did not stop until Maryutka

gave him a punch in the ribs. Then he got up and wiped the tears off his lashes.

“What you roaring at?”

“You’re a rare specimen, Maria Filatovna! You’d cheer anybody up. You’d make even the dead dance.”

“Why not? Or do you think it’s better to go round in circles like a log in a whirlpool, neither coming to one side, nor to the other—making yourself dizzy and other people sick?”

Again the lieutenant burst out laughing, and he slapped Maryutka on the back.

“All glory to you, queen of the Amazons! My good man Friday! You’ve turned the world upside down for me, Maryutka! You’ve poured the elixir of life into my veins! I don’t want to go whirling round any more like a log in a whirlpool, to borrow your expressive simile. I can see for myself that it’s too soon for me to go back to my books. I’ve got to see some more of life first, got to bare my teeth, got to bite like a wolf so that others will be afraid of my fangs.”

“What? Do you really mean you’ve come to your senses!”

“That I have, dear girl! I’ve come to my senses! Thanks for teaching me a thing or two. If we bury ourselves in our books at a time like this and let you do what you like with this old earth of ours, there’ll be hell to pay. No, my dear little Amazon, it’s too soon to—”

He broke off with a gasp.

The ultramarine orbs were fixed on the horizon and flames of joy were dancing in them.

He pointed out to sea and said in a quiet, trembling voice:

“A sail.”

Maryutka leaped up as if a spring had been released and stared in the direction of his finger.

She saw a little white spark fluttering, quivering—a sail shaken by the wind.

She pressed her hands to her breast and feasted her eyes on the sight, unable to believe in the reality of this long-awaited moment.

The lieutenant jumped up and down beside her, seized her hands, tore them away from her breast, swung her in circles about him.

He did a dance in the sand, kicking up his thin legs and singing in strident tones:

*Whitely gleams a lonely sail
Upon an azure sea. . . .
Tra-la-la! tra-la-la!
Fiddledy, diddledy-dee!*

“Stop it, you idiot!” laughed Maryutka happily.

“Maryutka! My darling girl! My queen of the Amazons! We’re saved! We’re saved!”

“See, you’ve got the longing to get back to the world of humans, too, haven’t you?”

“I have, I have! I just told you so, didn’t I?”

“Wait—we’ve got to let them know; we’ve got to signal.”

“Why? They’re headed here.”

“What if they turn off to another island! There’s millions of them. They may pass us by. Bring a rifle from the shanty.”

The lieutenant rushed off. In a minute he came back throwing the rifle into the air and catching it.

“Don’t fool with that thing! Fire three shots into the air!” called out Maryutka.

The lieutenant put the butt to his shoulder. Three shots shattered the glassy stillness, and each shot almost felled him. Only then did he realise how weak he had become.

Now the sail was plainly visible. Yellowish-pink, it skimmed over the water like the wing of a bird of good omen.

"What sort of a boat is it?" murmured Maryutka, staring at it intently. "Too big for a fishing smack."

Evidently those in the boat had heard the shots. The sail quivered and veered to the other side, and the boat, heeling well over, made straight for shore.

"Must be a boat belonging to some fishery inspector or other, but why should they be sailing this time of year?" asked Maryutka.

When the boat was about four hundred feet away it turned and a man's form appeared in the bow. Cupping his hands round his mouth, he called to them.

The lieutenant started, strained forward, threw down the rifle, and in two leaps was at the water's edge. He stretched out his arms and shouted in a frenzy of joy:

"Hoo-ray! Our men! Good lads! Hurry up!"

Maryutka peered intently at the boat and saw—gold bars gleaming on the shoulders of the man standing in the bow.

She fluttered like a frightened bird, then stiffened.

Memory flashed a picture before her eyes:

Ice . . . blue water . . . the face of Yevsukov. His words: "If you run foul of the Whites, don't give him up alive."

She gasped, bit her lip, snatched up the rifle.

"Back, you damned White Guard!" she shouted in despair. "Back, I tell you!"

The lieutenant went on waving his arms, standing ankle-deep in the sea.

Suddenly from behind him came the deafening blast of the planet, shattered by fire and storm. Instinctively he leaped aside to escape catastrophe. The blast of the dying world was the last sound his ears ever heard.

Maryutka looked at him.

His head was lying in the water. Red streams from his shattered skull were dissolving in the liquid glass.

She ran forward and knelt beside him. Dropping her rifle, she tore at the collar of her tunic. She tugged at the limp form, tried to lift the mangled head. Suddenly she collapsed on the body.

"Oh, what have I done? Look at me, sweet! Open your dear blue eyes!"

Just then the boat ground up on the sand, and its occupants stared dumbfounded at the girl and the man.

Translated by Margaret Wetlin